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AUTHOR John, Vera
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ABSTRACT

Problems in the measurement of communicative competence of American Indian children are discussed in this position paper. Problems include the failure of traditional observations and measurements, and judgments by educators based on non-Indian experiences and expectations. Some trends in contemporary research concerned with these problems are noted: that reliance on standardized testing is being criticized as being inappropriate for minority children; that research combining various disciplines is in the process of development; and that a serious effort to build a theory of language pedagogy is emerging. Specific recommendations are given for (1) extensive investigations planned and directed only by Indian scholars, (2) training of tribal specialists, and (3) workshop sessions for specialists in various disciplines to work together in small-scale experiential efforts at developing curricular ideas for improving language skills. In addition, the training of Indian scholars is indicated as a step toward meaningful research. A 10-item bibliography of background articles is included along with 6 references. (PS)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

A Position Paper
Submitted to
Southwestern Cooperative Educational Laboratory

By
Vera John
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Research and Development Needs and Priorities
For the Education of American Indians

1. Nature of the issue

Many teachers of Indian children report with sorrow and/or annoyance their view of the limitations in verbal expressions of their pupils. Whether they assess this shortcoming by classroom observation or nationally standardized tests, their descriptions focus on the reluctance of Indian children to participate verbally in the classroom, and a lack of precision in their written work.

I sympathize with the frustrations the teachers so often express, however, I believe that we can learn little about the communicative competence of Indian children if we base our approach on traditional observations and measurement.

When teachers make informal assessment, they base their judgments upon their own non-Indian experiences and expectations. Language plays a specific role in their lives. They became what they are by means of certain verbal skills, their society is enmeshed in spoken and written communications, the mass media have become the life blood of their professional and secular lives. Similarly, measures of performance of language skills are based on the experience of mainstream children, whose lives are governed by the many private and public forms language takes in contemporary America. Our tests are not effected by the verbal styles and tastes of rural children who have become a minority. Most of them, regardless of their ethnic membership, compare poorly in tested verbal performance with their urbanized peers.

These considerations concerning the inappropriateness of the usual ways of assessing language are particularly serious in the case of Indian children. Their experiential world is in no way reflected by the approaches used by teachers and psychologists. The focus of this paper will be away from evaluation-based methods of intervention. Instead, we will start with a view of how children learn, and then question, how should they be taught?

Training is a very small part of the development of any human capacity, though a necessary one. Children learn when they are eager, curiously and selfishly eager co-participants in the process of learning. Their need for pleasure and triumph takes many cultural forms, but unless their deepest emotions and strengths are mobilized, children perform for the teacher, but they do not develop their capacities.

There is no need to detail why the Indian child finds himself in a particularly unfavorable position for learning actively and joyfully in school. At the very time when major theoretical debates are sweeping the intellectual community about teaching and learning, life in most schools for Indian children is effected by external criticism, and feelings of insecurity on the part of the teacher; pupils and teacher both feel threatened by the demands for quantitatively improved classroom performance on the part of Indian students.

This mounting pressure creates, in my mind, a situation similar to that predicted by Labov when he comments on the educational approaches developed by Bereiter and Engelmann for ghetto Black children: "those who know the sociolinguistic situation cannot doubt that the reaction against the Bereiter-Engelmann approach in later years will be even more violent

on the part of the students involved, and that the rejection of the school system will be even more categorical." (4, p.28)

In other words, if the choice of an instructional approach is based on the notions of an achievement gap, (i.e. the mean difference in percentiles between mainstream and Indian children on a particular achievement test) the pattern of test-determined teaching will be chosen, as in the model popularized by Bereiter. He is committed to eliminate the test performance gap between disadvantages and advantaged children. While this is not necessarily absurd, it lacks the very ingredient most needed for educational innovation; the examination of the social and historical meaning of such a gap. More significantly, a deficit theory sidesteps the depth study of the human process to be developed by education, in this case, language.

Our concern is better expressed by Hymes; this is why we have chosen to speak of communicative competence instead of verbal skills, or language proficiency.

In one of his definitions of the term Hymes invented, he speaks of "the capacity of children for creative use of language as part of the successful adaption of themselves and their communities in the continuously changing characteristics of contemporary life." (3, p.2)

The development of communicative competence, as approached in this paper, is not a course in English, or an instructional program for the improvement of language skills of Indian children who are native-speakers of English, but speak in an "Indian style." Instead, it is an attempt to discuss small-scale, community-based experimentations in new forms of communicative behavior, an approach based upon the writings of sociolinguists, such as Hymes, Gumperz, Labov, and others.

There are a number of useful articles, giving background to the subject to be discussed in this paper. I will refer to them according to topics:

A. Language Acquisition in Children

1. Ervin-Tripp, S. Language Development, in Review of Child Development Research, II 55-105. Edited by Martin Hoffman and Lois W. Hoffman. New York. Russell Sage Foundation, 1966.
2. John, V. P. and Moskovitz, S. "Language Acquisition and Development in Early Childhood" in Linguistics in School Programs, The National Society for the Study of Education. 167-214. University of Chicago, 1970.
3. Sinclair-deZwart, H. Developmental Psycholinguistics in Elkind and Flavell, Studies in Cognitive Development. Oxford Press, 1969.
4. Hymes, D. Bilingual Education: Linguistic vs. Sociolinguistic Bases in Alatis.

B. Studies of American Indian Children

1. Wax, M. L., Wax, Rosalie, and Dumont, R. Formal Education in an American Indian Community. Supplement to Social Problems, 1964, Whole no. 4.
2. Cazden, C. B. and John, V. P. Learning in American Indian Children, to appear in Wax, M. L., Diamond, S. and Goering, O. (eds.) Anthropological Perspectives in Education. New York, Basic Books, in press.
3. Ohannessian, S. (ed.) Styles of Learning among American Indians:

An Outline for Research. Washington, D. C. Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969.

C. The Concept of Communicative Competence

1. Hymes, D. On Communicative Competence. London, Penguin Books, 1971.

2. Labov, W. The Logic of Nonstandard English in Alatis, J. E. Linguistics and the Teaching of Standard English to Speakers of Other Languages and Dialects. Georgetown University Press, 1970, pp. 1-45.

3. Troika, R. C. Receptive Competence, Productive Competence, and Performance in Alatis, (see under 2) pp. 63-75.

2. Current status of research on 'communicative competence.'

While there are a number of studies aimed at assessing the status of language skills in American Indian children, an inquiry complicated by the diversity of languages spoken by these children, few of them are truly relevant to the subject as defined in this paper. The interested reader may wish to check the references in the Cazden and John article mentioned above, as well as the files of the different E & R labs, funded by the Office of Education.

From a sociolinguistic point of view, the study of communicative acts of children living in Indian environments is just beginning. Such a research endeavor requires the examination of language uses on the part of young Indian speakers in schools, while moving through the open spaces, and at home. Research, then, in the ecology of language use combined with

the study of language forms, and meanings, is an ambitious undertaking. It requires the skill of linguistics, psychology, anthropology and education. Crucial to any empirical work is the acceptance of the researcher by the Indian community.

A few small-scale investigations, of the kind specified in this paper, have been undertaken. A recent, excellent paper by Mrs. Susan Philips, working among the Warm Springs Indians of Oregon is an example. She documented how Indian children decrease their verbal participation and question-asking behavior in their classrooms, as they get older, while they become more articulate in face-to-face situations. (5) Her findings compare with those of R. Dumont, summarized in "Learning English and How to be Silent--Studies in American Indian Classrooms." (1) He reveals how Sioux and Cherokee children, and their parents are committed to the goals of formal education, however, the burden of cross-cultural conflict triggered by the teaching-style of some of their teachers creates a situation in which little learning can take place over a prolonged period.

The focus on successful cross-cultural instruction is an important one. The very injunction, these children have to learn to speak and write English, in order to make it in the wider community, often stands in the way of how teachers and children can come together to create an environment in which they can both function. Dumont's description of Mr. Howard, a teacher whom he characterizes as "subdued, calm, and almost sluggish. Behind it all is an amazing vitality exercised in finding ways of getting the students to work together....After watching his class at work it was clear...that he was...talking about the classroom as one unit or a 'team' of which he was a part." is of great interest in this regard. (1, p.13)

Mrs. Phillips' observations of the importance of the circle, a form of interaction deeply characteristic of Indian life where everybody can see everybody while no direct pressure for participation is put on anyone, also gives pause for thought. How should we approach the development of communicative competence in Indian children? We know so little about the uses of language in their communities.

The impatient educator always retorts: We have a job to do, these children need certain skills, we cannot wait for vague and confusing research findings to guide us, when perfectly useful programs have been developed in the past for teaching foreign students to speak in English, or, when immigrants have learned to master the national language of the USA in relatively short periods of time.

The only answer to such reasoning is to point out, as William Labov has done, in his brilliant article, "The Logic of Non-Standard English," (4) the enormous dangers of "research" findings which neglect the true social context in which language is elicited from minority children. The inappropriateness of the traditional methods leads to false generalizations about inferiority (genetic and otherwise) and consequently to teaching which reinforces current stereotypes.

While existing research is badly flawed in the assessment of language skills of minority children, there are vigorous and important developments in the study of language acquisition in very young children. These studies have increasing relevance to questions of training versus growth by exposure, what Spolsky recalls as having been termed "the sunburn model." (6, p. 149) In his article, "Linguistics and

Language Pedagogy," he presents a series of implications, which offer a beginning toward a theory of language pedagogy.

To summarize briefly, we observe three trends in contemporary research of importance to the Development of Communicative Competence in Indian Children. First, traditional investigations relying upon standardized tests of achievement are increasingly criticized as leading to little useful knowledge about minority children. Second, a new kind of research, combining the various disciplines of psychology, linguistics, anthropology and education, is in the process of development. Sociolinguistic studies, steeped in these various approaches are being conducted, though in small numbers, aimed at discovering the functions of language for children raised in diverse settings. These studies may come to constitute an important beginning of an appropriate research methodology, and offer findings of use to teachers. Thirdly, we are witnessing a serious effort to build a theory of language pedagogy. The many educational fads, that now plague the schools, are, in part, the result of the lack of theories of instruction. An alternative is emerging, ever so slowly, from the combined efforts of scholars in linguistics and related fields.

3. Future needs in research and training

Of greatest significance to the inquiry into the communicative competencies of Indian children is the question, who is doing the research?

Contemporary research workers in the social sciences have discovered that meaningful work requires a first phase of painstaking observations, to be followed by quantitative studies. Bruner and Piaget have shown the importance of such an approach in developmental psychology, Roger Brown

and Ruth Weir demonstrated the usefulness of observational studies in the field of language acquisition.

The need for careful descriptions is particularly compelling in cross-cultural research. Many of us believe, that at this stage of our efforts, social scientists drawn from the majority culture have serious, possible insurmountable difficulties in accurately observing life among minorities. The training of scholars drawn from these communities is an essential step toward the objective of meaningful research.

Indian students in anthropology, linguistics, psychology and other fields have the potential for combining academic know-how with a personal knowledge of tribal communities. The increasing numbers of community-based and controlled schools offer a promising setting for research and observations for these students. The effects of educational innovation appear to be of particular significance in changing patterns of communication between Indian children and their teachers.

In my own wanderings, I was struck by what I have observed at the Rough Rock Demonstration School. The summer school students who were taught away from the main campus--in traditional Navajo brush-shelters--behaved differently from those schooled in the regular buildings. The "brush-shelter" students were out-going, animated; they clustered around their teachers, and participated actively in their lessons. Their parents were able to visit in these schools set up so close to the children's homes. Sheep, horses, dogs surround these temporary classrooms. To me, the atmosphere seemed unique, the learning of a free and intense nature. But as an outsider to Navajo life, my observations are subject to manifold biases. Erickson, who was chosen to evaluate Rough Rock and other schools

on the Navajo reservation also imposed his cultural views on the way he collected his data. (2) Our conclusions are in opposition to each other, but in both instances the dangers of cross-cultural distortions are real. Hence, the need for well-trained observers who are part of, and intimately familiar with the life they are asked to observe and evaluate.

The development of communicative competence implies the process by means of which children cope with their social, inanimate and personal worlds. Studies relevant to this basic human process, though theoretically oriented, are carried out in concrete social environments. The children who serve as subjects are usually white and middle-class. The task of discovering the relevance of these studies to Indian children requires the contribution of scholars drawn from their communities.

4. Specific recommendations

a. The obvious conclusion to the ideas presented in this paper is that we should refrain from extensive investigations into the communicative patterns of Indian children unless, or until, such efforts can be planned and directed by Indian scholars.

b. The non-Indian social scientist committed to the improved education of Indian children should devote himself to assisting and training increased numbers of tribal specialists. Research institutes, as well as universities have much to offer to young Indians in this regard. A shifting of priorities in the allocation of funds, giving training the highest ranking is a necessary step in the implementation of these proposals.

c. Educators working with Indian children are likely to respond with

concern to these proposals. They have articulated an urgent need for assistance in developing language skills on the part of their pupils. Their expectations are that university specialists will develop new curriculum ideas to be implemented in the classroom. That procedure is flawed by the many problems I have attempted to describe in this paper. An alternative is the method used by some of the new bilingual schools; teachers, community resource people, linguists, psychologists, and curriculum specialists meet in workshop sessions. They might work together over the summer, in the settings that the schools are situated in. Their efforts, small-scale and experimental in nature, are open to modifications.

As more substantial knowledge evolves in theories of instruction, and in the study of Indian life, more ambitious efforts may be warranted.

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